

【論 説】

DEMOCRACY IN MONGOLIA: CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND THE MEDIA

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Preface

Although democratic thought and different types of democratic systems may be dated back to ancient histories of humanity, many scholars argue that it was the 20th century, which made democracy a real practice in political leadership and social development. As for Mongolia and its citizens, the opportunity to establish democratic ideals in politics and in society became a reality 26 years ago from today. The political revolution of 1990 had a strong impact on the evolution of political, social and economic aspects of Mongolia as a country. As a result, though more is left to achieve, it is important to note that Mongolia as a country was successful in seeding the elements of democracy on its soil.⁽¹⁾

With foundations of civic and political engagement and the rule of

law, Mongolians acquired the right to vote for local representative, parliamentary and presidential elections all at once. This freedom allowed for the establishment of a parliamentary government, representatives of which were democratically elected from a multi-party system. Yet even a deeper change was common people's understanding of and engagement in politics. As the peak of this achievement, Mongolia set the legal environment for its citizens to freely engage in society through politics, economics and other social means. Fostering and further developing this political culture in future is a real test facing Mongolia.

However, this paper does not intend to discuss this particular issue, as it is a separate study of its own. Rather this paper hopes to analyze the core elements (or ideas) of democracy in Mongolia and the civic engagement of public in politics.

1 The main goal of direct democracy

Discussing public issues openly and in participation of all, ancient Greeks and Romans engaged in the idea of direct democracy. One of the exemplary places of this type of democracy was the ancient Athens. In comparison, modern democratic nation states have adopted the representative form of democracy. Though it may be the best system in place thus far, representative democracy has its own weaknesses. For this reason, some scholars argue that direct democracy is a substitutive asset, which can reduce the weaknesses of representative democracy.⁽²⁾

In direct democracy, issues are discussed openly by the participation of all in one place at the same time, allowing for the dissemination of information and the resulting conclusion and decisions to be fair and transparent. Similarly, modern day mass media makes this mode of discussion and decision making in politics more available and accessible to public.

The main goal of direct democracy is to make the entire state (or government) policy and decision-making processes fair, transparent and inclusive of public opinion.

This allows the state (or the government) to gain public trust and it further helps to establish stability in political and economic aspects of society. Macpherson, for example, argued that direct democracy is highly influential in establishing fair, transparent and humane societies. He further claimed that improved stability and continued development of justice and civic engagement in society allows direct democracy to expand.⁽³⁾

The right to political engagement in Mongolia was established and firmly confirmed by the Constitution of Mongolia in 1992, which stated in its chapter 1 and clause 3.1: In Mongolia, “the power to govern is in the hands of its citizens. They have the right to directly engage in the state (or government) affairs through their elected representatives”.⁽⁴⁾ In other words, Mongolia achieved Abraham Lincoln’s “government of the people, by the people, for the people...”⁽⁵⁾ by its Constitution in 1992. Also, Mongolia is realized Alexis De Tocqueville’s “Doctrine of the sovereignty of the people that we must begin”⁽⁶⁾

2 The Constitution of Mongolia and political engagement

The Constitution of Mongolia guaranteed citizens the right and freedom to engage in political affairs without any hindrance that this has been the building block of democratic development of the country. In particular, in chapter 2, clause 16.9 of the Constitution, it is stated that citizens have “the right to participate in governmental affairs through their direct or indirect representatives. They have the right to vote for candidates and self-nominate (or be nominated) for elections. A citizen earns the right to vote at 18 years of age. As for other citizens, who self-nominate (or are nominated) for different governmental positions, the relevant age requirement is

determined by separate laws or regulations of that field.”⁽⁷⁾ Also, in the same chapter, the clause 16.10 states that, “whether it be individual political belief, individual interest or the interest of public, citizens have the right to establish political and other types of parties at will. However, it is prohibited to discriminate against any citizen, who is a member of (or decides to join such) political and other types of parties.”⁽⁸⁾ Though there are other important clauses in the Constitution, these two have solidified the citizens’ rights to civic as well as political engagement.

In addition to the Constitution ratified in 1992 and still in effect, other laws such as the Law on Political Party (1990), Law on Election (2015), Law on Non-Governmental Organization (1990) and Law on Public Opinion (1995) contribute to the foundation and function of the legal environment on civic and public engagement in Mongolia. In all of the laws above, legal participation in political affairs are seen as conventional, while participation deemed illegal is regarded as non-conventional.

Today Mongolian people’s political engagement can be observed in the following forms of activities:

- Voting in elections, self-nominating (or being nominated) for elections
- Establishing and enlisting in political parties, political group cooperating, or de-enlisting from those organizations
- Expressing personal views and opinion freely through mass media
- Participating in governmental affairs through direct or indirect means (i.e. through representatives)
- Legally and safely organizing and participating in protests

3 Different levels of political engagement

However, it is important to note that due to various social and economic factors, citizens have different levels of political engagement and some

lack the opportunity to be heard. As a result, there is an imbalance of civic engagement in public. In an effort to illustrate this problem, this paper conducted a sociological survey to analyze if there are different levels of civic engagement in society and how they practically change among people. This survey was conducted in Ulaanbaatar, the capital city of the country, where 47% of all voters and 46% of the total population of the Mongolia lives.

In an effort to diversify the pool of respondents as much as possible, the survey utilized a randomization method in selecting respondents. Majority of the respondents represent Ulaanbaatar's following districts: Songinokhairkhan, Bayangol, Chingeltei, Sukhbaatar, Khan-Uul, and Bayanzurkh. The main goal of the survey was to analyze civic engagement and, accordingly, the following question was asked: *"How often do you think you engage in social and political debates of the day?"* Answers of the respondents were as follows:

Table 1

| Nu | Response | Percentage of the Total |
|----|-------------|-------------------------|
| 1 | Always | 8.7% |
| 2 | Sometimes | 63.5% |
| 3 | Never | 20.1% |
| 4 | No Response | 7.8% |

Source: *Survey on Influential Factors in Mongolian People's Political Engagement*. The National University of Mongolia. UB, 2015.

According to the results of this question, the level of civic and political engagement of Mongolians is not sufficient. The majority, or 63.5%, of the total respondents answered they "Sometimes" engage in current political and social issues. This response rate can also be an indicator of how actively Mongolians participate in different election cycles held once

in every four years. In the meantime, though colossal in importance, it is imperative to note that one-time participation in an election (held once in four years) is not the best indicator of civic and political engagement. 29% of the respondents replied that they either “Never” engage in political matters or that they have “No response(s).” Many social and economic conditions must affect their responses, though it is hard to pinpoint one or two definitive reasons.

The civic and political engagement of Mongolians is low and in comparison with disengagement of Westerners from politics, Mongolians have very different reasons. Majority of voters in Western states are in the middle class, but politics and slight changes in it have small effect on the middle class citizens. The level of political development, maturity and consistent continuity of policies in Western states influence the disengagement of citizens from politics, but in a positive way. In comparison, Mongolia’s majority of population is not in the middle class and even a slight change in some aspect of government policy has a great impact on the lives of its citizens. As a result, in response to major and

Table 2

| Nu | Influential Factors | Percentage of Total |
|----|--|---------------------|
| 1 | Major Social Issues (i.e. unemployment, poverty) | 40.4% |
| 2 | Human Rights Violations | 6.8% |
| 3 | Lack of Opportunities for Political Engagement | 4.1% |
| 4 | Personal Interest (or Gains) | 14.7% |
| 5 | Social Stress | 5.5% |
| 6 | Injustice in Society | 16.4% |
| 7 | Distrust in Political Parties and the Government | 3.8% |
| 8 | Other | 8.2% |

Source: *Survey on Influential Factors in Mongolian People’s Political Engagement*. The National University of Mongolia. UB, 2015.

frequent changes in political policies, Mongolians tend to grow dissatisfied, jaded and disengaged from politics.

Another angle of investigation in this paper is the reason (or reasons) that attracts Mongolians to choose to actively engage in social and political activities. With this in mind, a pool of respondents was asked the following question: “*What social, political and/or economic factors motivate you to attend political party or civic association-led activities?*”⁽⁹⁾

Based on the results, it is easy to conclude that the factors that motivate political engagement are of social origin in background. In other words, 60.4% of the respondents either cited major social problems such as unemployment, poverty, social stress, or injustice as their main reasons.

As for the question of “What means of civic and political engagement do you choose to employ?” the respondents gave the following answers:

Table 3

| Nu | Engagement Means | Percentage of Total |
|----|---|---------------------|
| 1 | Mass Media | 30.9% |
| 2 | Direct Communication with Governmental Organizations (e.g. phoning, mailing, sending inquiries, etc.) | 43.8% |
| 3 | Participating in Protests | 12.9% |
| 4 | All of the Above | 12.4% |

Source: *Survey on Influential Factors in Mongolian People's Political Engagement*. The National University of Mongolia. UB, 2015.

According to the results of the survey, Mongolians now use mass media and direct communication with governmental organizations (e.g. by phoning, sending inquiries and letters, etc.) as main means of communicating with the government. Historically, the 1990s means of

active engagement in politics for public was participating in safe and regulated protests, but now the impact of mass media and the internet is not only changing this culture but helping the public communicate with the government.

Accordingly, this paper sought to analyze ways that mass media impacts politics. Thus, the next question was: “*What informational source do you receive information from?*”

Table 4

| Nu | Informational Source | Percentage of Total |
|----|----------------------------|---------------------|
| 1 | Print Journalism | 81% |
| 2 | Conversations with Friends | 8.5% |
| 3 | Governmental Press | 5.1% |
| 4 | Non-Governmental Sources | 4.9% |
| 5 | No Response | 1.7% |

Source: *Survey on Influential Factors in Mongolian People's Political Engagemen*. The National University of Mongolia. UB, 2015.

As shown in the table above, print journalism was the main source of information for respondents. Due to both economic and political developments in Mongolia, the role of print and other forms of journalism have been expanding and become more accessible to the largest share of population than before.

4 The media impact

Unlike the pre-1990s, where media was used only to promote one party policy system, mass media in Mongolia today promotes pluralistic ideals in reporting. Major TV Stations today seek to report current day political and economic issues by organizing debates and live exchange of ideas between opposing politicians, economists and thinkers in view. Notable TV programs

on stations such as the MNB, TV 25, C1, and Mongol HD have pluralistic discussions and debate programs, which range from politics to economics to various social issues of the day. For instance, “Let’s Talk,” “De Facto,” “Open Discussion,” “Endless Talk,” “Uncensored Talk,” and “Moves and Solutions” are some of the most well-known programs in Mongolia.

The level of independence in media, especially the TV industry, reflects the political leadership of that country. In 2005, Mongolia’s national TV and radio stations were privatized and labeled as “public” media stations. With the parliament approval on 27th of January 2005, a new law approved the total independence of the national TV and radio stations, to be effective starting from the 1st of July 2005. This approval allowed the stations to be truly expressive of public opinion instead of the government. In current day Mongolia, the freedom to express one’s opinion through mass media or the internet is unlimited and this is allowing citizens to affect different levels of decision-making institutions. This is in part a testament to the development of citizen journalism in Mongolia.

The renowned Mongolian scholar on journalism L. Norovosuren argued: “Citizen journalism is an interactive mode of reporting, which draws the voices and experiences of different classes of people in one place, allowing all to be heard”.⁽¹⁰⁾ Citizen journalism in Mongolia has developed to encompass and critique all aspects of society including human rights, protection of the environment, global warming, justice in society and other present and pertinent problems. Raising these issues through this mode of journalism (i.e. citizen journalism) helps to hold various organizations as well as the government accountable. For instance, people now employ citizen journalism to raise awareness of various issues in their communities and to bring it to the attention of authorities.

Furthermore, democracy promotes plurality in ideas and defends the rights of citizens to express their opinions freely. In the modern day, mass

media and citizen journalism are actively contributing to the increase in civic engagement. But the accuracy and truthfulness of the information dispersed through these means are questionable. Therefore, to illustrate this issue, the following question was asked: “*Do you think the information you witness (i.e. listen, read, watch, etc.) is accurate and balanced for (or reflective of) both sides of the argument?*”⁽¹¹⁾

Table 5

| Nu | Informational Source | Percentage of Total |
|----|--|---------------------|
| 1 | Yes, it is balanced | 22.6% |
| 2 | No, it needs to be investigated further | 65.5% |
| 3 | No, it has no relevance to the veracity of reporting | 11.8% |

Source: *Survey on Influential Factors in Mongolian People's Political Engagement*. The National University of Mongolia. UB, 2015.

Based on the results, it is easy to conclude that the majority of public (or 65.5%) does not regard the information it receives from mass media outright truthful or correct. In this regard, it could be argued that on one hand the information that circulates from mass media is stragically fabricated and on the other hand that the public does not yet have the sophistication to critically analyze the information it receives.

The next issue this survey sought to investigage was the actual impact of, if there is any, mass media on the decision making processes of local as well as national governmental organizations. “*Under this pluralistic democratical regime, do you believe you have influence in any decision making processes of governmental organzations?*”

Table 6

| Nu | Informational Source | Percentage of Total |
|----|--|---------------------|
| 1 | Yes, I believe my voice is impactful. | 13.8% |
| 2 | No, I don't believe my voice is impactful. | 22.2% |
| 3 | No, my voice is not impactful but I believe mass media should be utilized more effectively | 63.0% |
| 4 | No Response | 1.0% |

Source: *Survey on Influential Factors in Mongolian People's Political Engagement*. The National University of Mongolia. UB, 2015.

As shown in the table above, 85.2% of the respondents point out that their voices are not heard properly and that mass media must be utilized even more to actually be impactful on governmental decision-making processes. Given this large a margin, this issue must get a serious attention and review of scholars.

Though mass media seems to have great impact on social, economic and political topics of the day, it does not seem sufficient or effective enough to deliver the voices and wills of the public to the government. As a result, public stress and frustration are illustrated through mass media on one hand and on the other hand, the realizing this issue, government attempts to appease their demands through mass media.

Conclusion

Since 1990 ways that Mongolians engaged in social and political issues have changed dramatically. The role of mass media in this has been crucial and it continues to develop and circulate vast amount of information across the social landscape of the country. As a result, citizens have come to adopt more appropriate and advanced understanding of their political choices and its impact in society. Although this progress and positive change is due

to various social and economic factors, democracy, direct democracy in particular, should take the credit.

Survey analysis of this paper concludes that civic and political engagement in Mongolia has become a reality in practice. However, the further development and successful continuation of this achievement is a practical challenge for future. Therefore, in an effort to increase civic and political engagement of Mongolians for future, this paper recommends the following:

- To establish a comprehensive public policy to address social, political and economic issues the country faces today
- To implement the full functionality of the Constitution and work to eliminate inequality in society
- To establish more independent and self-governing governmental units in smaller political boundaries of Mongolia through amendments in the Constitution
- To solidify the independence of mass media from political and economic influences (e.g. political parties, businessmen, etc.) and to establish a good legal environment for the prosperity of it
- To establish an independent organization to monitor for the veracity of information circulated through mass media
- To eliminate ways that citizens are discriminated against due to differences in political affiliations and views
- To reduce human rights violations, especially that of freedom to speech (e.g. to express opinion, participate in safe and legal protests, enlist in various political and social groups, and to employ mass media to criticize and evaluate various topics, etc.) and to improve ways that civic organizations can cooperate with governmental entities

Finally, there is a real need to continue to protect and increase the level of civic engagement of public in society. For this effort to be successful,

a good legal environment to be put in place is crucial consideration. Additionally, conclusion of the paper to its survey is that Mongolians do engage in civic as well as political issues of the day, but only if there is a (private) motivation or need for it. However, this level of civic and political engagement has to improve to a higher level and achievement of this condition will make direct democracy more useful and impactful in Mongolia.

Notes

- (1) Sodnom Shirchin, Ganbold Tseren and Dovchin Yondon, “Democratization of Mongolia and Election”, *Political Science Journal* Vol. 297 /50, (Ulaanbaatar: National University of Mongolia, 2009) p. 6.
- (2) Crawford Brough Macpherson, *The Real World of Democracy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1966) p. 25.
- (3) *Ibid.*
- (4) The Constitution of Mongolia, Chapter 1, clause 3.
- (5) Henry F. Graff, *The Presidents* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1984) p. 260.
- (6) Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993) p. 55.
- (7) The Constitution of Mongolia, *Ibid.*, Chapter 2, clause 16.9.
- (8) *Ibid.*, Chapter 2, clause 16.10.
- (9) *Survey on Influential Factors in Mongolian People’s Political Engagement*. The National University of Mongolia. Ulaanbaatar, 2015.
- (10) Lombo Norovsuren, *Civil Society and Citizen Journalism*. Vol 12/370. (Ulaanbaatar: National University of Mongolia, 2011) p. 23.
- (11) *Survey on Influential Factors in Mongolian People’s Political Engagement*. (Ulaanbaatar: National University of Mongolia, 2015).

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